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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Yugoslavia's Ethnic Conflict and its Regional Fallout [REDACTED]

Summary

For Yugoslavia, it is "back to the future" as the systemic collapse of Tito's socialist federation has given free rein to nationalist and separatist forces. Even though federal military forces failed to follow through on their threat in late January to disarm the local militias in Croatia and Slovenia--a move that would have led to bloodshed--the threat of military intervention to prevent the secession of these republics remains. That continuing threat and imminent ethnic violence on several fronts make it likely that the country this year will suffer serious internal conflict, with important consequences for neighboring states. [REDACTED]

Serbian aggressiveness combined with the aspirations for independence among the other nationalities increase the likelihood that the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation will be accompanied by violence. The most likely flashpoints of ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia would pit the Serbs against a host of perceived enemies that includes Croats, Albanians, other Muslims, and Macedonians. Yugoslavia breaking up could draw neighboring states with ethnic or historical equities to protect--such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania--directly into the

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fray. Ripple effects that could include large-scale refugee flows, requests for assistance, and spillover from guerilla warfare would demand the attention of West European states, international agencies, and the United States. [REDACTED]

This Memorandum surveys our thinking about the current state of play in Yugoslavia and puts the most recent political crisis pitting Serbia against Croatia into the broader context of a pervasive ethnic conflict in the country that could have a significant impact on US and European interests. [REDACTED]

Discussion

Democratization and pluralism in Yugoslavia have not led to the easing of political tensions. Instead, they have given rise to ethnic-based political parties that are helping tear the federation apart and give voice to virulent nationalist hatreds. Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims, Albanians, Macedonians, and a host of other peoples are fixated on the past, with its mass killings, betrayals, forced migrations, and "lost" territories. The passage of a mere half century has not assuaged the bitterness of World War Two, when 1,700,000 Yugoslavs died--mostly at the hands of other Yugoslavs. The best known and potentially most explosive hatreds are between the Serbs and the Croats. The atrocities committed against each other by the Croatian fascist Ustashi movement, Tito's ethnically mixed Partisans, and the Serbian royalist Chetniks still poison political life, especially in ethnically divided Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, which has a small (12 percent) but radicalized Serb minority. [REDACTED]

Such animosities would come to the fore in the most likely scenarios for conflict in Yugoslavia:

- An attempt by the military forcibly to prevent the secession of one or more republics; or
- Interethnic violence within or across republic borders, pitting Serbs against Croats, Kosovo Albanians, other Muslims, and possibly Macedonians. [REDACTED]

The Secession Scenario

The current political divisions among the republican governments appear irreconcilable with a unified Yugoslav state. Electorates in Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina last year all gave majorities to anti-Communist and "national" parties. The Serbian heartland of Serbia proper and Montenegro opted to stay with the Communist old guard. As a result, Yugoslavia now is cleft by a faultline; on either side, societies are evolving in such a way that they would no longer

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fit together, even if they were free of ethnic hostilities. Slovenia and Croatia are more or less democratic and market-oriented; while, anti-democratic and socialist habits persist in Serbia and Montenegro. The other regions share attributes of these two camps and are caught uncomfortably between them.

The Serbian Engine of Unrest

The reelection of Slobodan Milosevic as President of Serbia last December has reduced the chances for a peaceful dissolution of Yugoslavia. His hardline Serbian nationalism fuels the nationalist passions and separatism in the non-Serbian republics and within the Serbian provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina with their large Albanian and Hungarian populations. Milosevic's assertions of the claims of a "Greater Serbia"--including territorial demands on its neighbors--and his reliance on an iron fist to suppress the Albanians and other minorities in Serbia provoke fear as well as resentment in the other republics. Milosevic is likely to respond to the recent massive anti-Communist demonstrations organized against him by the Serbian opposition by beating even harder on the nationalist drum.

Milosevic and the other old guard forces [SEE BOX] view Croatia and Slovenia as the most immediate challenges to their ideal of a centralized and authoritarian state. A Slovenian plebiscite last December overwhelmingly approved independence and has set the clock ticking on a maximum six-month countdown to secession. The Slovenian legislature has begun to take steps to sever ties, including a formal call for the "disassociation" of the federation issued on 20 February.

Concurrently, the government of President Franjo Tudjman in Croatia has adopted a new constitution that authorizes secession if an arrangement for a loose confederation modeled on the European Community is not worked out among the six republics. Despite Zagreb's lip service to the notion of negotiating a confederation, all parties recognize that the feasibility of such an accommodation has all but disappeared.

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Defenders of the Political Status Quo

The Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). The leaders of the JNA share Milosevic's Communist tenets, and they are the last champions of Tito's ideal of a Yugoslav state which submerges ethnic nationalism. They have repeatedly threatened to use force to prevent the country's breakup. The JNA came within an inch of cracking down in January on the "illegal armed formations" (local militias) formed by Croatia and Slovenia to defend their sovereignty, and were deterred only by the last minute opposition of the collective Federal Presidency. Army leaders may not be amenable to such control in the future.

The orthodox Communists who comprise the recently formed "League of Communists-Movement for Yugoslavia" are closely connected to the JNA and are reminiscent of Moscow-sponsored "National Salvation Committees" in the Baltics. Like the Salvation Committees, this party could provide political cover for a move to impose martial law.

Premier Ante Markovic. Markovic, a Croat, presides over a small pan-Yugoslav party and leads a federal government of diminishing relevance. Markovic has on occasion implicitly endorsed the use of force to bring Slovenia and Croatia into line, but also has sought to be a peacemaker.

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Potential Flashpoints

Serbs and Croats

In the end, Milosevic and the military hold the keys to Yugoslavia's future. Milosevic appears to believe Yugoslavia's days are numbered, even though he continues publicly to insist on a unitary Yugoslav state. He explicitly designed the new Serbian constitution last year to serve an independent state, suggesting that at some point Serbia is ready to go it alone. Such a decision, however, does not necessarily preclude conflict. Milosevic has asserted that the dissolution of Yugoslavia will put internal borders, which he terms "administrative lines", up for grabs, something Croatia and Bosnia are determined to resist.

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Serbian leaders have hinted that they might countenance the secession of relatively small and ethnically homogeneous Slovenia. Croatia counts for far more in Serbia's calculations, in large part because its population of 5 million includes some 600,000 ethnic Serbs mixed with the Croat population.

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The most likely flashpoint between Belgrade and Zagreb would be a confrontation over rebellious Serbs in Croatia. The Krajina Serbs in western Croatia have already unilaterally declared themselves the Autonomous Region of Krajina (SOAK) and pledged to establish a state independent of Croatia. They look to Serbia for protection and have called upon the federal government and JNA to protect them from "the fascists in Zagreb". A standoff between Croatian authorities and the "SOAK" has been punctuated by armed clashes and the periodic blockade of road and rail traffic through the area.

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The most serious incident so far foreshadows how a future showdown could develop. Federal troops, Croatian police commandoes, and armed Serbian civilians briefly exchanged gunfire over the weekend of 2 March in the Serb township of Pakrac after Croatian forces moved in to suppress a rebellion against Croatian authorities by local Serbs. This time there was no intervention from Serbs from outside the republic, but the most extreme nationalists in Serbia talk of forming paramilitary units to "defend" the Serbian minority.

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If the JNA Moves

A military crackdown--even the use of modest force to impose "order" in the Serb areas of Croatia probably would prompt what it was designed to avoid--a rapid move to complete independence by Croatia and almost certainly by Slovenia as well. Leaders of the two republics say they have agreed to secede immediately if either republic is attacked by the Army. Tudjman has repeatedly vowed that Croatia would fight any army intervention; local clashes could quickly escalate into a larger conflict, which probably would be bloody and chaotic. If--as is likely--the

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fighting were prolonged, the JNA itself probably would split along ethnic lines, adding to the chaos. The largest remnant would probably transform itself into The Army of Serbia, opening the way to further conflicts with Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia on behalf of pan-Serbian goals. [REDACTED]

Bosnia

The even more ethnically heterogeneous Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina--a killing ground that saw some of World War Two's most brutal internecine atrocities--is also a likely flashpoint over Belgrade's claims to defend Serbian minorities. Serbs comprise about a third of the population and usually confront a political alliance of Muslims (39% of the population) and Croats (18%). The results of the December elections there followed strictly ethnic lines, and the campaign was marked by confrontations between Serbs and Muslims. Should Slovenia and Croatia secede, many Muslims favor Bosnia leaving the federation rather than staying on to endure a rump "Serboslavia". In this event, Bosnia's Serbs almost certainly would attempt to secede from the republic and join Serbia, a move that would likely trigger at least interethnic communal violence and possibly intervention by Serbia and Montenegro. [REDACTED]

Kosovo

Yugoslavia is also plagued by another major festering ethnic conflict, one involving the Albanians and Serbs. This conflict could explode either spontaneously or in conjunction with a Serb-Croat-Slovene showdown. The conflict between Serbs and Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo appears irreconcilable. Formerly the heart of the medieval Kingdom of Serbia and scene of a heroic but failed battle against the Turks still commemorated as the most important event in Serbia's history, Kosovo now is ninety percent Albanian, mostly Muslim. Serbian repression of this Albanian population--always harsh--has become even more draconian since members of the prorogued local parliament declared Kosovo a separate republic last July. By all accounts, Albanian patience has about reached its limits in the face of measures ordered by Milosevic that include firing thousands of workers and "Serbianizing" businesses, schools, and the media. Police killed at least 100 street demonstrators in 1990, and Albanians are speaking openly of armed insurrection. Local Albanian leaders caution that they will not be able to hold back violence indefinitely. [REDACTED]

Serbian policy in Kosovo is likely to backfire and fuel the very thing that Belgrade fears--Albanian separatism and, even worse, a desire for unification with Albania. A recent survey by the most popular Albanian-language newspaper in the province found that most Albanians believe the solution to Kosovo's problems lies in merging with Albania, something which they think could happen very quickly. [REDACTED]

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Serbian fears are already evident. In early February, the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry summoned the Albanian ambassador for a dressing down after demonstrations outside the Yugoslav embassy in Tirane calling for unification. If Albania reforms and breaks away from out of the primitive authoritarianism under which it has languished, it could become a powerful attraction to the downtrodden Kosovo Albanians. Representatives of the ethnic Albanian opposition Kosovo Democratic Alliance already have met with both the Tirane regime and Albania's non-Communist opposition. [REDACTED]

The reelection of Milosevic undercut those Albanian leaders in Kosovo who have been trying to reach a modus vivendi with Belgrade. The above survey also indicates that only seven percent support dialogue with the Serbs while 31 percent favor an armed struggle. The chances have dramatically increased that Kosovo Albanians soon will turn to violent resistance, provoking a downward spiral of repression and guerrilla warfare that could become a Balkan intifada. [REDACTED]

The Muslim Factor

An Islamic threat extending beyond the Albanian community to encompass Muslim Slavs and Turks is an even more alarming nightmare for the Serbs. Serbian anxiety about an international Islamic conspiracy to forge a "green swath" into the center of Yugoslavia is coloring current perceptions and policies. A straw in the wind for the Serbs was the recent decision by the leadership of the roughly four-million strong Islamic community for the first time to denounce Serbia for its mistreatment of ethnic Albanian Muslims in Kosovo. The previously quiescent Muslim Supreme Assembly on 16 January blasted Serbia for its human and civil rights violations and called on Muslims throughout the world to show solidarity with the Albanians. Many Serbs may fear that local Muslims have been energized by the Gulf war and that this act is a harbinger of greater Muslim political activism in the future. At a minimum, the Muslim Supreme Assembly's criticism is likely to add to Serbia's siege mentality. [REDACTED]

Serb anxiety centers on the Muslim majority in the Sandzak region of Serbia, where the inhabitants have also expressed sympathy for their fellow Muslims in Kosovo and in Bosnia. The Serbs fear an attempt to cut Kosovo and the Sandjak--considered by the Serbs yet another historic cradle of their nation--out of the Republic of Serbia. Some Serbs go further in painting nightmare scenarios and see the possibility of these two areas joining predominantly Muslim Bosnia in a new confederal order. Serb-Muslim frictions were intensified by last fall's elections, when police were called in to prevent clashes. [REDACTED]

According to the Bosnian press, Milosevic recently warned Alija Izetbegovic, president of Bosnia and leader of the Muslim party, not to interfere with Serbia's plans nor to dare secede

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from the federation. In the latter case, Milosevic threatened to crush Bosnia with the Army and bring the republic under Serbian sway. The report is said to have alarmed the local Muslims--whose memory of the massacre of Muslims in 1941 by the Serbian Cetniks is still vivid--and caused many to arm themselves and prepare for defence. [REDACTED]

The Macedonian Question

Nationalist passions are on the rise in Macedonia too, and violence and terrorism could be in the offing there. The largest block of seats in December's election was won by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), which traces its name and roots to a terrorist group notorious for its violence in the early decades of this century. IMRO vows an armed fight for independence, if this is the only way it can be won. Macedonia has long been an object of competition among Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, none of whom acknowledges that a distinct Macedonian nationality even exists. The Serbs--who call the Macedonians "southern Serbs"--feel a particular grievance: they believe that Tito established the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia after World War Two only to undercut Serbia's weight in the federation. [REDACTED]

Alliances, however, are particularly difficult to predict in Macedonia. Macedonian extremists may find common cause even with otherwise detested Serb nationalist elements on the basis of their common hatred of the sizeable Albanian minority in western Macedonia. Albanians won almost 20% of the seats in the republic assembly and have aroused Macedonian fears that they will press for union with Albania if Yugoslavia breaks up. [REDACTED]

Macedonia would find it almost impossible to avoid becoming embroiled if Slovenia and Croatia move to secede. In this case, we believe that Serbia would press to keep the Macedonians in a rump Yugoslavia or try to incorporate the republic into a Greater Serbia. Macedonians would resist--even moderate Macedonian leaders have said that they are prepared to go it alone if Yugoslavia breaks apart and the Croatian and Slovenian counterweight to the Serbs disappears. [REDACTED]

International Implications

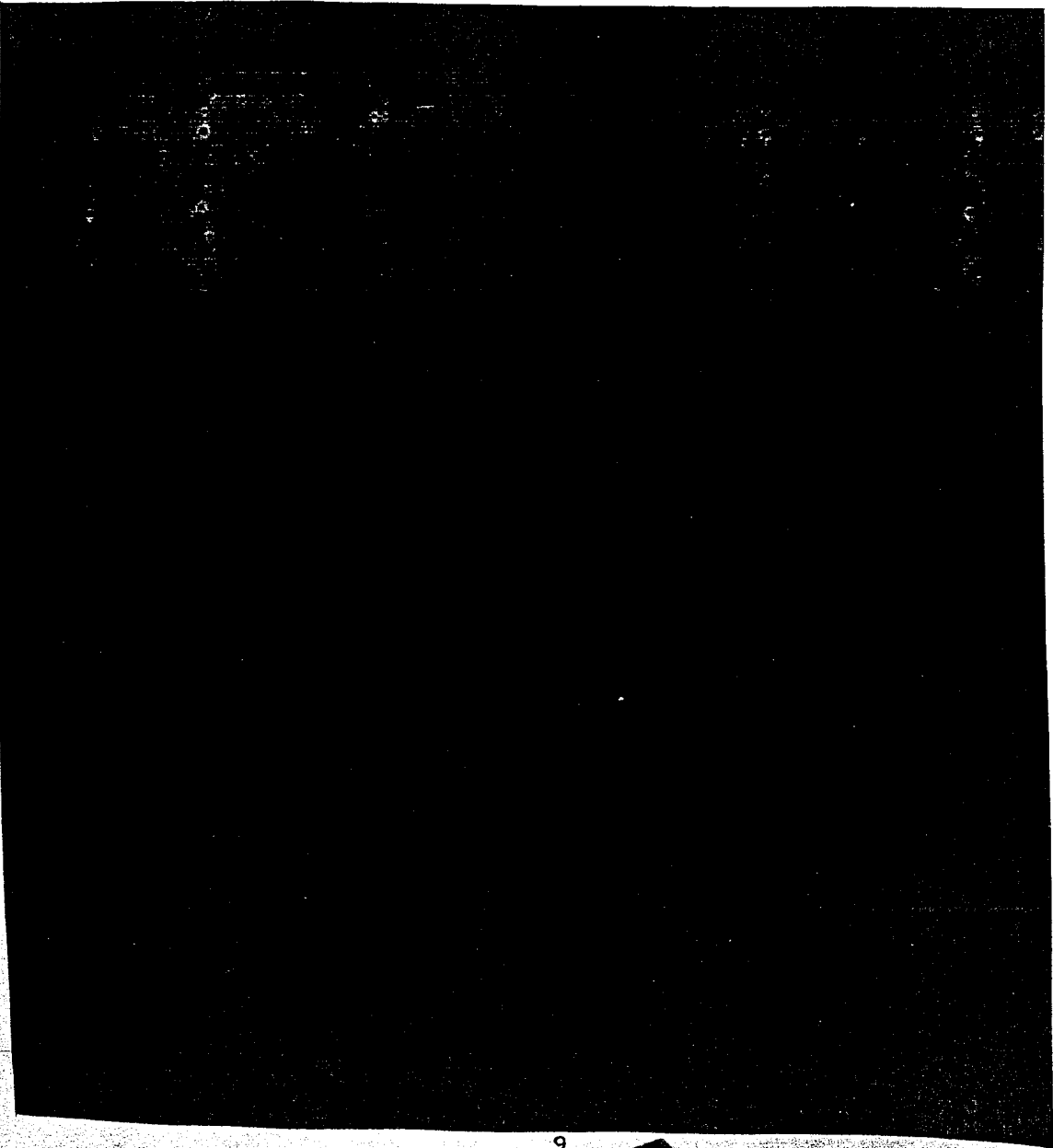
Events in Yugoslavia have the potential to derail the prospects for a peaceful political evolution of the Balkans in the direction of the European mainstream. It cannot be excluded that Slovenia and perhaps Croatia will be able to slip unimpeded into that mainstream, but odds are that some violence will accompany the first breakup of a European state since the end of World War One. Aggressive and uncompromising actions by Serbia will increase the chances for a violent outcome. In the worst case, civil war could turn Yugoslavia into a witch's cauldron of

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ethnic strife, where violence spills over into neighboring countries and beyond, to ethnic emigre communities in Western Europe and even the United States. [REDACTED]

Whatever the level of conflict, a disintegrating Yugoslavia will quickly engage neighboring states with their own interests to protect. Some also will have axes to grind. Such states could include NATO allies and friends of the United States, like Greece, Italy, and Austria--which have already increased military readiness at their borders--as well as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Albania. [REDACTED]



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The ripple effects from a final Yugoslav crisis marked by violence and disorder would extend far beyond those states which directly intervene. All of Europe and especially Italy and Austria would have to contend with large-scale refugee flows from the outset. The Slovenes and Croats would press their Western European neighbors and the United States for political and even military support against Serbia. Guerrilla warfare would likely slop over international borders too. Such warfare, accompanied by forced population transfers and communal violence and other human suffering, would engage international mechanisms for mediation and relief agencies.

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